

**M or F?**

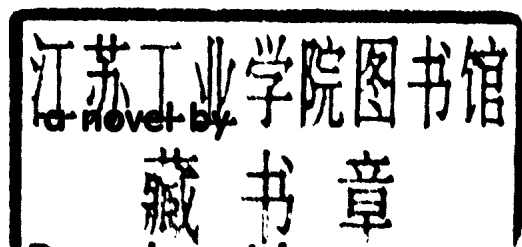


**papademetriou and tebbetts**

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**Lisa Papademetriou  
and Chris Tebbetts**



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RAZORBILL

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Young Readers Group

345 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York,  
New York 10014, U.S.A.

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue, Suite 700, Toronto,  
Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3 (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland  
(a division of Penguin Books Ltd)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell,  
Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)

Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park,

New Delhi - 110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), Cnr Airborne and Rosedale Roads, Albany,

Auckland 1310, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue,

Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand,  
London WC2R 0RL, England

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Interior design by Christopher Grassi

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Papademetriou, Lisa.

M or F? : a novel / by Lisa Papademetriou and Chris Tebbetts.

p. cm.

Summary: Gay teen Marcus helps his friend Frannie chat up her crush  
online, but then becomes convinced that the crush is falling for him instead.

ISBN 1-59514-034-4

[1. Gays—Fiction. 2. High schools—Fiction. 3. Schools—Fiction.

4. Friendship—Fiction.] I. Tebbetts, Christopher. II. Title.

PZ7.P1954Maor 2005

[Fic]—dc22

2005008149

Printed in the United States of America

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**M or F?**

**i One** I'm thinking this whole thing will make a good movie someday. It will be the first feature from Tributary Productions, which will be my company. Tributary, as in, out of the mainstream but always going somewhere. Productions, as in, life is one big. . . . Frannie says I'm a drama queen. I prefer to think of myself as someone who knows a good story when he sees one.

So. Opening credits roll. Camera tracks down the hallway of a typical high school. Make that painfully typical. Everyone you see looks like someone else you already know. Geeks and gods and everyone in between are either hanging out or jostling along, all of them wearing clothes that look like they came from the same mall, which they

probably did. The camera passes by a big banner on the wall; it used to say GO BUCKS, but now the word YOURSELF is scrawled after it, with the S in BUCKS crossed out. A grumpy looking thick-necked teacher with a bad tie is taking the banner down as the camera passes him by and pushes into a crowded cafeteria.

Move in on a small table at the far corner, where someone is sitting with his back to the camera. He's sixteen, has straight dark hair that shags over his ears, and wears a bright green T-shirt with BOOLIO on the back in black writing. The way the camera is positioned, you think he's eating alone, but then a girl's face comes into view as she leans a little to the side to look at something over his shoulder. She's the same age but more put together than he is, with lots of curly dark hair pulled back from her face and a wavy fade-stripe top that almost looks out of focus and definitely didn't come from everyone else's mall.

That's me and Frannie, or at least the movie versions of ourselves, who of course will be better looking. (Hey, it's my movie; I can do what I want.) The camera moves in closer. Frannie's eyes register something across the room and she says:

"Hm."

And that's really how this all began. Not even a syllable. I didn't think much about it at the time, but I did look up from my bowl of Fruity Pebbles.

“What?” I asked her.

“Nothing,” she said, as in, something, but I was going to have to ask twice to find out.

“*What?*” I asked again.

“That girl, Astrid.” Frannie was still staring over my shoulder. “She’s just hanging all over him.”

“Who?”

“Astrid. That girl from Germany. The exchange student with the big lips and the stupid shoes.”

“No,” I said, knowing better than to turn around conspicuously. “Who’s she hanging on?”

But now Frannie was back on her sandwich like it was the most interesting thing she’d ever eaten. She might as well have had the word *oops!* in a little cloud-shaped bubble hanging over her head. I knew right away she had said more than she wanted to, which was strange for us. We always told each other everything, so of course I was more interested than ever. Now I gave myself permission to turn around and look. I did it subtly, without letting my eyes stop in any one place, then turned back to face Frannie again.

“Jeffrey Osborne,” I said. That’s who Astrid was hanging on. “Good choice.”

Jeffrey Osborne was all the right things and wasn’t any of the wrong things, either. He was hot—blue eyes, long eyelashes, sexy little smile, nice arms—but he wasn’t stuck-up

about it. (I don't think he knew how good looking he was, which always makes a person better looking.) He was also nice but didn't seem sugary sweet. He was quasi-high profile at school, but he wasn't mainstream, either. As far as I knew, he didn't really slot in with a particular group or clique, but he always had a swarm of people hanging around him.

And hanging was exactly what Astrid was doing. She had one hand clamped on Jeffrey's shoulder like she couldn't stand on her own. They were working a table in the cafeteria, getting volunteers signed up for something to do with Green Up Day. At least, Jeffrey was working the table. Astrid was just working Jeffrey.

Frannie, meanwhile, was plowing through her pastrami on rye like it was Astrid's head.

"I can't believe this is the first I'm hearing about this," I told her. "How long have you been window shopping him?"

"I don't know," she lied. That meant a long time.

I leaned in close. "Do Jenn and Belina know about this?" Jenn and Belina were Frannie's girls on the side. I had best friend status, but sometimes they could get things out of her that even I couldn't.

Frannie shook her head. "There's nothing to know."

"That's so not true," I said. This was about the hundredth deep dark secret Frannie had ever told me, but as far as I knew, it was the first one she had ever held back



before telling. That meant something. I tried wearing her down with a heavy stare for a few seconds but then realized something else.

“Wait a minute. This isn’t just an eye candy thing. You’re *big* smitten, aren’t you?” That’s why she wasn’t talking. If silence speaks louder than words, right then Frannie’s silence was saying *crush, crush, crush*, which is different than *hot for, hot for, hot for*. Hot was all she’d ever been for anyone until now.

I walked my fingers across the table and up her arm. “So what are we going to do about this?” When I reached her ear, she squirmed off to the side.

“We,” she told me, “are not going to do anything.”

“Yeah,” I said. “That’s exactly the kind of line people give right before they do the thing they just said they weren’t going to do.”

“This is real life, sweetie,” she said. “Not a movie. Remember?”

“It’s the same thing,” I argued.

“Actually, it’s not.”

“Well, it ought to be.”

We both took bites of food at the same time and chewed in silence. End of round one.

I started round two almost right away. “Just go see what this Green Up Day thing is about,” I told her. “You don’t even have to do anything. Just get on his radar.”

“And say what?”

I patted Frannie’s hand. “You’re so cute when you’re stalling. Let’s see, how about . . . ‘Hi. What’s this Green Up Day thing all about?’”

“It’s bad timing,” she said. “Astrid’s right there. She’s practically stapled to him.”

“That means it’s perfect timing,” I told her. “Time to send in the staple remover.”

“Ooh, office supplies. Very sexy,” she said.

“Ooh, changing the subject. Nice try.”

Frannie rolled her eyes. Translation: she knew I was right but didn’t have a comeback.

“Seriously,” I went on. “You’re thinking about it too much. If you want, you can pretend in your mind that you’re not interested in him, but then don’t act like you’re not interested in him when you’re over there. It’ll help you balance out.”

“Okay, one.” She started counting out her responses on her fingers. “I’m not even sure what you just said. Two: saying that something is easy doesn’t make it easy. And three: remember the guy at the Thai place? I didn’t see you going for it and getting all bold. Let’s see, what happened? Hmmm. Marcus got lost in his pad ki mao and never said a word.”

“That was some stranger in a restaurant,” I said. “This is someone we know at school.”

“*Barely* know,” she interrupted.

“Whatever. It’s totally different.”

The other difference was that this was her we were talking about—not me. It’s always easier to know what someone else should do. Not to mention the fact that Frannie’s odds were so much better than mine. Roaring Brook High School wasn’t exactly crawling with out and eligible gay boys. I couldn’t even find someone to have a realistic crush on, much less think about finding a boyfriend. This Jeffrey thing, on the other hand, had some potential.

“Just go,” I told her, but I could see she wasn’t ready. She looked over in Jeffrey’s direction again with this expression on her face like a kid in a toy store with no money.

“Maybe later,” she tried.

“Maybe later he’ll be with Astrid,” I said, and then right away, “I’m just kidding,” because she was a little fragile right now, although we both knew I wasn’t completely kidding.

I snuck another look, taking Jeffrey in with fresh eyes. I’d noticed him before, just because he was nice to look at, but I’d never really *considered* him. “He *is* cute,” I said to Frannie. “Not necessarily my type, but I can see where you’re coming from. And he definitely makes more sense than Ronald McDonald.” That was my nickname for

Frannie's last and strangest crush ever: Ron McHauser. The guy played everything-ball, had one gigantic eyebrow, and was only an animal pelt away from looking like a natural history museum display: early Cro-Magnon Jock. Frannie had started the school year with this thing for him that I had never been able to understand. And in fact, she had gone out with him exactly once. They'd gone to Taco Bell (strike one) on their way to seeing some Vin Diesel movie (strike two), where Ron had skipped the popcorn and gone straight for Frannie's crotch. The end.

"I'm going to buy Ron McHauser off of you," she said. "How much to never mention him again?"

"I'd say one conversation with Jeffrey Osborne would about cover it."

She rolled her eyes again, in that if-I-didn't-love-you-I'd-hate-you kind of way. At the end of the eye roll, though, she was looking over my shoulder in Astrid and Jeffrey's direction.

"Hm."

Just one vowel away from "him."

Sixth period after lunch Frannie had Latin and I had geometry. Standing at our lockers just before the bell, I gave her an assignment.

"Okay," I said. "Remember how you made that list—"

"What, the pros and cons of getting gold highlights?"

she said, reading my mind. “Not exactly the same thing.”

“Except,” I stressed, “that it helped you decide to go for it.”

Frannie pulled her Latin book out of her locker and slammed the door. “Okay, even for you, that’s stretching it a little thin, don’t you think?”

I wasn’t going to argue. “This time, just make it five good things about Jeffrey. It’ll give you a reason to take the next step. And if you can’t come up with five things by seventh period, then that should tell you something, too.”

“I barely even know him,” she said again. “It’s just a feeling, not an itemized list.”

“Okay, fine,” I told her. “Just don’t come whining to me when you’re eighty and don’t have anyone to squeeze your boobs.”

“Um . . . ew?”

“That’s not an answer.”

“Okay, okay, okay. I’ll do it.”

“Do what?” Jenn asked, just arriving at Frannie’s locker with Belina. The two of them always picked her up on the way to sixth period.

I had to stifle myself. This was Frannie’s thing to tell. Jenn and Belina both stared at her, and when she didn’t say anything, they turned to look at me. I just raised my eyebrows and kept my mouth shut.

“Don’t make us ask twice, ’cause you know you’re going

to tell,” Belina said. She always cuts through the crap to the truth of anything. Of course, she’s also the only one of us with a boyfriend, so she can afford to be a little cocky.

Frannie shook her head. “I’ll tell you on the way to class.”

“What did you get her into this time?” Jenn asked me, but they were already walking away.

“You’re going to like this one,” I told them. Jenn glanced back with this very puzzled look on her face. Then again, that’s her normal expression. She’s much smarter than she looks (she’s got that typical blond Barbie kind of thing going on), but smart isn’t the same as quick.

I went in the opposite direction, toward geometry, my first period of the day without Frannie. Ethan Schumacher fell in step with me out of nowhere.

“Hey hey,” he said. “What’s going on?”

“Hey, Ethan.”

“Listen, the GSA’s doing a tarot card-reading booth for the carnival. Interested?”

“No thanks,” I said.

Ethan was president of Roaring Brook High School’s Gay-Straight Alliance and was always trying to get me involved. He was a perfectly nice person but seemed to think that being gay meant we were supposed to have all kinds of things to talk about, which we never did.

“You should come to another meeting,” he told me for the millionth time.

“Maybe I will,” I answered for the millionth time.

I couldn’t blame him for his persistence. At the one meeting I’d ever gone to, it had been about ninety percent well-meaning straight kids and Ethan. He was slowly working up the queer membership, but I just wasn’t interested. It wasn’t like I had a jam-packed social calendar, but somehow, Frannie and I managed to fill a large percentage of our time with each other, and the idea of using the GSA as a dating service was (a) kind of gross and unethical, and (b) not going to happen anyway, given the current membership.

A little less than an hour later, I was sitting next to Frannie again. She slid me a folded piece of paper just after Mr. Hartley turned his back to the class and started writing on the board, something about the stock market crash of ’29.

I unfolded Frannie’s list and started reading.

1. *We would look good together. Beautiful babies, too (no, I’m not actually thinking about that seriously, so shut up—but we would look good together).*
2. *He does all kinds of good causes. Green Up Day, etc., etc.*
3. *He’s a junior, so he’s not graduating this year and going away somewhere.*
4. *He’s a vegetarian.*

I looked over at Frannie and pointed at number four with my pencil. She shoved the paper back into my hand so Melissa Carpenter, who was trying to see without looking

like she was trying to see, wouldn't see. Then Frannie grabbed my notebook and scribbled something on the page. Mr. Hartley rounded the corner into the Great Depression and kept going. Frannie slid my notebook back.

*I support vegetarianism, even if I don't practice.*

It didn't completely make sense, but enough that I had to let it pass.

5. *You and I said we were going to go for it if anything came up.*

That item wasn't actually a "good thing about Jeffrey," but it was a perfect opportunity for me to write back

*So why aren't you going for it? What's keeping you??*

She blacked out the question before Melissa could get a look at it and then didn't write anything in reply. I couldn't blame her for not having an answer. The fact that she didn't was kind of the point. The point being, we all need a little help sometimes, and maybe that was why Frannie and I had come into each other's lives in the first place.

Cue the flashback. The screen goes wavy and blurs out, then comes back into focus on swirling fall leaves, with an exterior shot of Roaring Brook High School.

It was a year and a half earlier. I was one of those kids no one ever wants to be, the ones who get moved across the country just days before starting high school. In my case, it was from Athens, Georgia, to Roaring Brook, Illinois, and it felt something like this:



*Welcome to your new life, Marcus. This is a school full of people who all know each other. You don't know any of them. They all already have enough friends, thank you very much. Oh, and you're queer. Ready? Go.*

Forget the school; I didn't know a single person in the whole state except my grandmother and father, who'd moved here with me. Not to mention that I was barely just starting to figure out who *I* was. I'd basically come out to myself that summer, so it was a less than optimal time to not have anyone to talk to, but there it was, and there I was. And then there she was.

Frannie rescued me on the second day of school. She just struck up a conversation in the cafeteria line. I think it was the first time anyone at that school said something to me that wasn't a question, as in, *Where you from? Do you have the answer to the equation? You want fries, honey?*

"Don't take the fries." She whispered it at my shoulder, like some kind of spy. I guess she was trying to be polite to the cafeteria lady, who at least called me honey.

I looked at the floor, playing it cool because she was whispering to me but also kind of excited because someone was *talking* to me. I saw a pair of vintage buffalo sandals and these two petticoats she was wearing as a skirt, and I thought, Cool.

"Do you have any little boxes of cereal instead?" I asked the cafeteria lady. When I turned away with my Frosted Flakes in hand, Frannie was standing there waiting for me. I